DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 351 PS 011 861

AUTHOR Ross, Dorene D.
TITLE Teachers' Beliefs: An Influence on the Lives of Children.
PUB DATE 79
NOTE 13p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (Atlanta, GA, November 8-11, 1979).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beliefs: Interviews: Observation: *Perception: Preschool Teachers: Teacher Administrator Relationship: Teacher Alienation: *Teacher Behavior: *Teacher Effectiveness: *Teaching Conditions

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices in three kindergarten classrooms and identifies four factors which seem to influence that relationship. Information about the classrooms was collected using the classroom disclosure approach, a form of educational criticism which combines and adapts methods from ethnography and aesthetic criticism. Observation, interviewing, and the collection of artifacts were the major tools of investigation. The three teachers differed in their beliefs about teaching and children and in their abilities to implement those beliefs. Factors that appear to influence teachers' ability to implement practices based on their beliefs are: (1) clarity of beliefs: (2) the ability to perceive connections between beliefs and practices: (3) awareness of alternative practices: and (4) perceptions about the beliefs of school system officials. The results of the analysis are seen to have implications for teacher education and the roles of teacher support personnel and administrators. The results also suggest that teachers need not feel isolated and powerless, and that by reflecting on professional concerns and sharing insights and information with their supervisors and peers, they can influence the teaching environment. (Author/RH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED195351

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

TEACHERS' BELIEFS: AN INFLUENCE ON THE LIVES OF CHILDREN

Dorene D. Ross

University of Florida

A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association for the Education of Young Children, Atlanta, November, 1979.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Dorene D. Ross

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

PS011861

TEACHERS' BELIEFS: AN INFLUENCE ON THE LIVES OF CHILDREN

Each day teachers' make a variety of decisions that influence the lives of children. They determine such things as what will be taught, how children will be grouped, what materials will be used, and how the environment will be arranged. Each of these decisions influences what children learn, as well as their attitudes toward school, learning, themselves, and others. It seems logical that teachers will rely on their beliefs about teaching and children in making these decisions, yet, surprisingly little research exists on the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices, or on the factors which influence the implementation of beliefs. This study investigates the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices in three kindergartens and identifies four factors which seem to influence that relationship.

WHAT DOES PAST RESEARCH TELL US?

Most previous studies have focused on the existence or non-existence of a relationship between teachers' beliefs and their practices (Haperin, 1976: Goodlad, Klein, Novotney, & Associates, 1973; Woog, 1972) while others have found that teaching practices vary according to teachers' beliefs (Bennett 1976; Harvey, White, Prather, Alter & Hoffmeister, 1966; Ryans 1960). These studies raise two questions. Do teachers vary in their abilities to implement their beliefs? And, if so, why do these differences exist?

Studies by Bussiss, Chittenden, and Amarel (1976) and Beck (1976) address these questions. An interview study of 60 teachers attempting to implement open education led Bussis, Chittenden, and Amarel (1976) to conclude that teachers who are aware of the connections between teaching priorities (beliefs) and planned activities (a clue to practice) are better able to implement their beliefs. This conclusion is based on teachers' self-reports of teaching practice which may or may not be an accurate reflection of actual practice (Metz, 1978). Consequently,

further research is needed to support the importance of this factor.

In her study of the relationship between teachers' goals and practices Beck (1976) interviewed five teachers and collected specimen records of childrens behavior. She found the ability to state one's beliefs clearly to be an important factor in successful implementation.

These studies indicate teachers differ in their abilities to implement their beliefs and suggest two possible factors which contribute to those differences. The present study supports the findings of these studies and identifies two additional factors which may contribute to differences among teachers in implementing their beliefs.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study involved three kindergarten teachers from a small southeastern city. Information about the classrooms was collected using the classroom disclosure approach, a form of educational criticism which combines and adapts methods from ethnography and aesthetic criticism (McCutcheon, 1976; 1978; 1979). Observation, interviewing, and the collection of artifacts, research methods associated with anthropological studies were the major tools of investigation.

During six to eight weeks of observation in each classroom, information about teaching practice was recorded in field notes. The recorded information provided a running account of classroom events noting the people involved, the atmosphere of the class, gestures used, dialogue of the participants, and anything else which contributed to an understanding of the classroom and the teaching practices of the teacher.

Information about each teacher's beliefs, the teaching contexts, and the impact of practice on children was obtained through formal and informal interviews. Formal interviews were conducted with each teacher and the principal.

Since teachers and principals may not always be explicitly aware of their beliefs, the questions, patterned after those developed by Bussis, Chittenden, and Amarel (1976), were designed to assess beliefs indirectly by obtaining opinions about various educational issues. The informal interviews were conducted with the three teachers, as well as with their principals, children, aides, and fellow teachers. These interviews were used to clarify researcher understanding of specific events within each classroom and school.

The researcher also collected or examined classroom artifacts such as children's work, teachers' plan books, texts, tests, and report cards. This information contributed to an understanding of classroom practices and of potential influences on classroom practice.

THE ROLE OF BELIEFS IN THE CLASSROOMS

The three teachers, Ms. Shore, Ms. Litten and Ms. Gessell[1] differed in both their beliefs about teaching and children and their abilities to implement those beliefs. Four factors seem important in understanding those differences: clarity of beliefs, the ability to perceive connections between beliefs and practices, awareness of alternative practices, and perceptions about the beliefs of school system officials. In a brief paper it is impossible to describe adequately the complex interaction of factors which contributed to each teacher's ability or inability to implement her beliefs.[2] Although here each factor is discussed through examples in only one of the classrooms, the reader is urged to remember that all four factors played a role in each classroom.

---

[1]The teachers' names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

[2]Because all three teachers included in the study are women female pronouns are used throughout the study when referring to teachers.

Clarity of Beliefs

It seems logical that clearly defined beliefs are a pre-requisite to the successful implementation of those beliefs. Ms. Gessell's classroom provides us with evidence of the importance of this factor. Many of Ms. Gessell's beliefs seem to contradict each other and her classroom practices. Consider the following example.

Ms. Gessell teaches reading and math readiness skills and gives directions for assignments during a large group instructional period each morning. Each assigned activity is then completed by every child. Although early childhood educators seem to endorse unanimously the use of small or individualized instructional groups (Gordon, 1972:22) a teacher may use a large group format with young children for a variety of reasons such as the demands of a schedule, the size of the class, or the lack of other adults to help supervise the children. However, Ms. Gessell does not mention any of these reasons in discussing her decision about grouping. In fact, she states a belief that children should not be grouped by the teacher.

> I think it's unwise to group kindergarten children because I don't think you can do that much academic.

Yet, an examination of classroom practice reveals that during the large group period children do written exercises, practice number, letter, and sound recognition, match rhyming words, and do sequencing activities. Since these activities certainly can be considered academic, the reasoning seems confused and inconsistent with practice.

Ms. Gessell further supports her belief that grouping by the teacher is inappropriate by stating that children need the opportunity to group themselves and select their own activities.

> I think what these children really need is to get around more with the different ones and if you've got enough in the things provided in the room, they're going to find a place and they are going to really group themselves.

However, during this time period Ms. Gessell does not provide opportunities for children to select their own activities, or move about the room. Instead, the children are seated at tables completing teacher assigned tasks. Again the reasoning seems confused and inconsistent with practice.

Detailed analysis of Ms. Gessell's statments of beliefs and her classroom practices revealed many such contradictions. Possibly she developed her teaching practices without considering the reasons behind them. Her statements may be rationalizations developed spontaneously only when confronted with questions by the researcher. As this classroom illustrates, a lack of clarity in beliefs can result in contradictions among one's beliefs and between beliefs and practice, supporting Beck's (1976) conclusion that clarity of beliefs is an important factor in a teacher's ability to implement her goals.

Two Important Factors

Awareness of alternative practices and the ability to perceive connections between beliefs and practices seem to be two of the many interacting factors important in Ms. Litten's ability to implement successfully many of her educational beliefs. Ms. Litten frequently reflects about her teaching day, comparing what has actually happened (practice) to her beliefs about what should happen in schools. She often tries different teaching strategies attempting to better match the two. Through reflection, re-evaluation, and experiementation, Ms. Litten has developed teaching practices which are consistent with her beliefs about children and teaching. It is important to examine the many opportunities Ms. Litten has had which strengthen her awareness of alternative practices and her ability to perceive connections between beliefs and practice.

Ms. Litten stresses the importance of taking professional education courses and reading professional literature as ways in which she increases her knowledge about children and possible teaching strategies. She says she "can't imagine"

not taking courses and reading a lot and "finding out new things."

She also has gained knowledge through interactions with other teachers. She has taught in several schools in two states which has provided her with exposure to a variety of educational materials and an opportunity to discuss teaching with several different teachers. She reports she gains new knowledge and skills by talking with and observing her fellow teachers, particularly in her present team-teaching situation. She believes teaming provides the opportunity for teachers to brain-storm collectively about children, goals, or trouble-spots in the curriculum, facilitating an awareness of alternative ways to reach desired goals.

> I can't imagine not teaming and having others to interact with--to share ideas, materials, thoughts, tears, laughs.....I think the advantage is having feedback from other adults.....We talk a lot about kids and I think that happens rarely (outside a team situation) because nobody else knows your kids.

Teaming also provides the teachers with an opportunity to observe one another. Ms. Litten states she gains insight into the possible effect of her teaching practices through the observation of others. In fellow teachers she may recognize previously unseen problems or benefits in teaching strategies she has used or considered using.

> You learn things you'd like to do or not like to do. Sometimes you see somebody doing something you know you do and you see it in a different light.

Thus observation facilitates an analysis of teaching practices and stimulates conscious reflection about the connection between beliefs and practices.

Perceptions about the Beliefs of School System Officials

Ms. Shore's perceptions of the desires of school system officials are a factor in the decisions she makes about what and how to teach. Although her principal has told her she may teach in any way she chooses, she believes

he does not approve of an informal approach to teaching. She reports that when her approach was more informal, he questioned her about her teaching and expressed concern about the lack of paperwork in her classroom. Now five years later, the principal seldom talks to Ms. Shore about her program.

> He leaves me alone. I do more academics now.

It seems likely the concurrent actions of the school system reinforced the messages Ms. Shore believed her principal to be sending. During the seven years she has taught kindergarten, the school system has gradually purchased readiness books which stress structured learning activities in reading, math, and science. Ms. Shore also has been given a skills checklist emphasizing the readiness skills taught in the books. Ms. Shore believes that the school system is telling her what skills to teach and how to teach them.

> Somebody has told me this is what you use and teach....It comes not just from people in my school but from the central office.

Her perception has been reinforced by the fact that her orders for manipulative materials are never filled.

As discussed earlier, the relationship between beliefs and practices in any classroom is influenced by a variety of factors. Ms. Shore's decisions, undoubtedly are influenced by her perceptions about the beliefs of school officials. However, the importance of this factor can only be understood in relation to Ms. Shore's clarity of beliefs and her awareness of alternative practices.

Ms. Shore's classroom mirrors her own conflict between the relative importance of informal play and structured learning activities. She was trained in a school which stressed informal, play-oriented learning. She values and wants to use this approach. She also believes academic skill development is important but seems to lack an awareness of informal or unstructured ways to teach these

skills. This lack of awareness of alternatives forces her to choose between structured academic activities and informal play activities. In addition, her beliefs are not sufficiently clear to enable her to establish clear priorities between the two approaches. As a result, she devotes most of her time and attention to structured activities and de-emphasizes opportunities for play and informal education. At the same time she expresses concern over the appropriateness of her teaching practices.

> I do feel at times that I'm cheating them (the children) and I feel bad about that because I think that free time (informal play) is just as important if not more really.

Thus by reinforcing her concerns about using an informal approach to teaching Ms. Shore's perceptions of the beliefs of her principal and the school system seem to be an important factor in decreasing the congruence between her beliefs and certain aspects of her teaching practice.

SUMMARY AND IMPLICATIONS

The present study does not tell us which beliefs about children and teaching are best or most effective. In fact, any attempt at such a prescription would undoubtedly spark an endless debate. However, we probably can agree that, whatever their beliefs, teachers should be able to implement them. This study indicates that teachers differ in their ability to implement their beliefs and identifies four factors which seem to influence those differences: clarity of beliefs, awareness of alternative practices, ability to perceive connections between beliefs and practices, and perceptions about the beliefs of school officials. The study raises many questions and issues of relevance to both educational researchers and practitioners. The focus in this section is on the questions and issues which relate most directly to practioners, that is to teachers, teacher educators, and teacher support personnel.

One important issue concerns the professional education of teachers. All three teachers have taken graduate level education courses and have participated in numerous in-service sessions; two have master's degrees. Yet two of the three teachers have difficulty defining and/or implementing their beliefs. Possibly teacher educators should re-structure courses, textbooks, and in-service programs to increase awareness of alternative practices and to stimulate reflection about beliefs and their relationship to practice. Because these factors appear to be important in a teacher's ability to implement her beliefs, teacher educators might explore ways of facilitating their development.

A related issue concerns the role of teacher support personnel. All three teachers expressed a desire for help with the practical problems encountered in making instructional decisions. Yet, none could name a principal, supervisor or teacher educator she believed might provide this help. This raises several important questions. Do teacher support personnel possess the knowledge and skills necessary to assist teachers in making instructional decisions. If so, why are the teachers unaware of this? If not, why not and what changes can be made to ensure teacher support personnel possess this knowledge?

Another issue is the potential influence of school officials on the decisions made by teachers. Ms. Shore's classroom indicates a teacher may alter her teaching practices according to her perception of the desires of school officials. However, without open discussion among school personnel, administrators unknowingly may communicate messages they do not intend. The resolution of this issue involves the exploration of many questions such as:

--How and why do textbooks, workshops, and skills checklists influence the school curriculum?
--Do we consider the potential influence of these materials when making selection decisions?
--How do principals communicate their beliefs about education to their teachers and does this influence the curriculum?
--Are these influences intended and are they positive?
--What other administrative decisions influence the curriculum and how?

Underlying these questions is the most fundamental one. What role should school officials, including principals, play in the curriculum decisions made by teachers. Should they be facilitators who help teachers develop the skills and knowledge to implement their beliefs, whatever beliefs they hold? Or should they prescribe instructional content and teaching strategies in an effort to ensure effective teaching? And if they fill the latter role, on what basis will these prescriptions be made? Certainly we must raise the question of whether we presently possess enough information about effective teaching to make such prescriptions with confidence.

The final implication discussed is more a comment than an issue. It concerns the sphere of influence of the individual teacher. Often, teachers feel isolated and powerless. They seem to feel considerable pressure about what and how to teach. However, Ms. Litten's classroom indicates the amount of influence the individual teacher can have, not only over her own classroom but also over others within her school. Ms. Litten shares professional insights, readings, and thoughts with her principal and with other teachers in her school. In turn, they have begun to share information and professional concerns with her. The reflective process used by Ms. Litten characterizes her entire teaching unit. Her co-teachers indicate this was not the case before she joined them. It appears the individual teacher can have an impact on her teaching environment, can become an instrument of change or growth. Admittedly, changes in teacher preparation programs and in the support services for teachers might make the teacher's role easier, but those changes will be slow in coming. In the final analysis, each teacher must be responsible for her decisions about what and how to teach, decisions which determine the character of the school lives of children.

REFERENCES

Beck, L.E., "How Well Do Classroom Practices Reflect Teacher Goals?" Young Children, 1976, 32(1), 64-81.

Bennett, H., Teaching Styles and Pupil Progress. London: Open Books, 1976.

Bussis, A.M. Chittenden, E.A. & Amarel, M. Beyond the Surface Curriculum. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1976.

Goodlad, J.T., Klein, M.F., Novotney, J.M. & Associates. Early Schooling in the United States. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1972.

Gordon, I.J., Early Childhood Education. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

Halperin. M.S. "First Grade Teacher's Goals and Children's Developing Perceptions of School." Journal of Educational Psychology, 1976, 68, 636-648.

Harvey, O.J., White, J.B., Prather, M.S., Alter, R.D., & Hoffmeister, J.K., "Teacher Belief Systems and Pre-school Atmospheres." Journal of Educational Psychology, 1966, 57, 373-381.

McCutcheon, G. The Disclosure of Classroom Life. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Stanford University, 1976.

McCutcheon, G. Educational Criticism: Methods and Application. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Toronto, Canada, 1978.

McCutcheon, G. "Educational Criticism: Methods and Criticism." Journal of Curriculum Theorizing, in press, 1979.

Metz, K.E., "The Relationship of Teacher Belief to Teacher Classroom Behavior." Educational Comment: Teacher Planning and Decision Making. The University of Toledo, 1978.

Ryans, D.G. Characteristics of Teachers. Washington, D.C., American Council on Education, 1960.

Wogg, P. The Relationship Between Elementary School Teacher's Assignments of Educational Priorities and their Practice: A Q Study. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Chicago, 1972 (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 061 176).